



MENTAL HEALTH LEGAL ADVISORS COMMITTEE FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOR DYS-INVOLVED YOUTH

What is MHLAC?

The Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee (MHLAC) assists children and adults with mental health disabilities. We are an independent state agency of the Supreme Judicial Court that can provide advice and direct legal representation to our clients. We work with people with disabilities on a wide range of legal issues.

How has MHLAC served youth?

For many years, MHLAC has worked hard for children and adolescents with mental health and behavioral problems. MHLAC assists these youth by seeking to protect basic rights and obtain appropriate services. As growing numbers of children with mental health disabilities become involved with the juvenile justice system and the Department of Youth Services (DYS), we recognize a need to serve youth in these circumstances.

Our forthcoming publication, *A Guide for Families to the Department of Youth Services*, describes the rights of youth involved in DHS, with special attention to mental health and educational services.

Why is there a need for MHLAC legal assistance?

Any youth charged with a criminal offense in Massachusetts has the right to an attorney to handle his or her defense. If the youth cannot afford an attorney, the court will appoint one. A youth who is found guilty (usually called "delinquent" in Juvenile Court) may be placed on probation, committed to DHS, or, in rare instances, sentenced to adult prison. Generally, legal representation ends with commitment to DHS and classification (the DHS proceeding to determine placement location and duration).

However, there are a number of legal issues that may arise following commitment and classification, including problems with the conditions of confinement, revocation of a grant of conditional liberty (like parole), or other civil matters. In certain circumstances, a public defender may be assigned to assist a DHS-committed youth on issues faced during confinement. On most occasions, however, youth face these situations unrepresented.

How can MHLAC help DHS-involved youth?

MHLAC aims to address this lack of representation of DHS-involved youth. These youth face special problems and need individually-designed services. MHLAC is also mindful that confined youth in Massachusetts are disproportionately people of color.

Youth and their families often have questions regarding:

- Mental health assessment and care;
- Education;
- Appropriate placement;
- Rights in facilities;
- Restraint;
- Disability discrimination;
- Transition to the community.

MHLAC seeks to address these issues. We especially are concerned with the ability of youth to access quality mental health care and special education services while confined or in the community.

By bringing cases to the attention of appropriate agencies, we strive to ensure that Massachusetts is at the forefront of best practices in mental health and education service delivery.



“MHLAC has been a great help to me and I would still be lost without their help... People listen to an attorney a lot quicker than they listen to the parent.”

-MHLAC assisted this father obtain services for his son who is committed to DYS.

How can I contact MHLAC?

MHLAC is a small office of attorneys that specialize in areas including mental health and education law. We work closely with our clients – communicating by phone or in person. When our client is a minor, we try to work jointly with the minor and his or her family. We aim to serve low-income families and we do not charge for our services. We have a toll-free telephone number so people in Massachusetts, including those people who are confined in facilities, can call us for free.

Please contact Sarah Sallen at:
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**We are actively seeking referrals of cases involving youth in the DYS system.
We welcome calls from youth, families, advocates and clinicians.**

*This initiative is supported in part by the Massachusetts Service Alliance.